

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

EVOLUTION OF THE BASE CLOSURE PROCESS:

THE STRUGGLE TO KEEP “THE STICKY FINGERS OF POLITICS” OUT

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Few public policy decisions rival the degree of angst created by military base closures. Among advocates and critics alike, the mere mention of the acronym “BRAC” evokes vehement reactions on Capitol Hill, just as it does in the White House, the Pentagon and civilian locales near military installations. This paper will examine the unique evolution of the controversial, but essential, decision process behind military base closures.

In the book, *Essence of Decision*, Graham Allison proposes three models for analyzing the decision-making process: the rational actor, organizational behavior and government-bureaucratic politics.¹ A fourth model, that of psychology, is also instructive in that it considers the influence of uncertainty, ambition and values in decision-making dynamics.² The evolution of the base realignment and closure (BRAC) process is a paragon of how rational, organizational, political and psychological factors are deeply embedded within public policy decisions. Precisely because sizing and shaping of military force structure and infrastructure have profound implications for myriad stakeholders, what should be a rational decision in the context of broad national security interests is anything but.

For the past three years, the Clinton administration has requested Congress authorize additional base closures to fund much-needed military modernization, arguing that military manpower has declined by 36 percent yet infrastructure has only been reduced by 26 percent. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff testified before Congress last year that eliminating excess bases would save \$21 billion, a sum that could comfortably buy 450 strike fighters, 650 Comanche helicopters and 12 new surface ships – certain items which may be of interest to congressional

¹ Graham T. Allison and Phillip D. Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 2nd Edition (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 1999), pp. 13-317.

² Dr. Charles A. Stevenson proposed psychology as a fourth model of assessing decision making during a November 12, 1999 lecture at the National War College.

districts.³ The Chairman and the Service Chiefs stressed, however, that BRAC savings must first replenish readiness accounts that have been mortgaged to keep modernization on track. Despite these urgings as well as personal pleas by Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Congress resolutely rejected approving more base closures.⁴ The reason offered by Senator John Warner, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee: “The sticky fingerprints of politics got in *there*.”⁵

The “*there*” referred to by Senator Warner is the most recent BRAC process, one that evolved from years of addressing inherent conflicts among a multitude of influences and stakeholders: executive and legislative authority; national, state and local politics and interests; defense and domestic spending levels; decision accountability and implementation. The most recent legislation governing BRAC emerged from a struggle to achieve some semblance of rational, or at least credible, decision-making by constraining as many influences and stakeholders as possible. As this paper will demonstrate, developing a rational base closure process -- one isolated from organizational, political and psychological influences -- remains elusive.

THE EVOLUTION OF BASE CLOSURES

Base closures are not a recent phenomenon. In the aftermath of World War II, considered by historians to be the peak of U.S. base inventory, hundreds of small recruiting posts, training grounds and mobilization centers were closed.⁶ During the 1960s, installations were closed in order to reduce excess overhead costs, while closures became even more routine during the Vietnam War drawdown. Of the 320 bases DoD sought to close in the 1970s, 309 were closed with

³ Paul Mann, “Chiefs Rap Congress on Readiness Slide,” *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, October 5, 1998, p. 29.

⁴ An amendment authorizing a single base closure round in 2001 was defeated in the Senate this year by a vote of 60-40. In 1998, the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) defeated an amendment offered by Senator John McCain for a final base closure round. An amendment in 1997 for two rounds of base closures was defeated 66 to 33 in the full Senate after a tie vote in the SASC. The House did not consider any similar amendments.

⁵ “Senate Blocks Base Closings, Rejects Abortions for Military,” *The Washington Times*, May 27, 1999, p. A-9.

⁶ “Panel Reviews Base closings,” *Legi-Slate, Inc.*, (March 1, 1995, Article 6015)

little debate, largely because the majority of these installations were small and their stakeholders lacked the political clout required to inspire vigilance by senators and representatives.⁷ As these facilities closed, the Services consolidated operations into larger, more remote installations with greater space in which to test and train modern weapons during the Cold War. The larger installations, anticipated to be targeted during a nuclear war, were generally located a safe distance from major metropolitan areas. This basing concept inadvertently created local economies almost entirely dependent upon the military's presence. Once it became clear that military installations were tantamount to big business in terms of their economic impact on local communities, politics by both the executive and legislative branches took on a greater role.

Loring Air Force Base (AFB) in northern Maine is a classic example of the protracted struggle between base closures, economics and politics. Once home to strategic bombers on 24-hour alert against U.S. nuclear attack, the Air Force decided to move assets from Loring when it became vulnerable to submarine launched ballistic missiles. Maine Senator Edmund Muskie and Congressman (now Secretary of Defense) William S. Cohen understood all too well the importance of the isolated installation to the small Maine community surrounding it. In 1976, when the Air Force sought to reduce Loring AFB from a main to a forward operating base, Muskie declared the decision "unsound, inconsistent with our national interests, and an economic injustice to the people of Northern Maine."⁸ In the House, Congressman Cohen partnered with House Majority Leader Tip O'Neil -- the powerful Democrat whose maxim was "*all politics is local*" -- to develop a strategy for defending military bases in the Northeast from closure.

⁷ Charlotte Twight, "Department of Defense Attempts to Close Military Bases: The Political Economy of Congressional Resistance," in *Arms, Politics, and the Economy*, ed. Robert Higgs (New York: Homes & Meier, 1990), p. 236.

⁸ Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Military Construction and Stockpiles, Hearings, Department of Defense Base Closures/Alignments, 96th Congress, 1st Session, June 13, 1979, p. 113 [testimony of Senator Edmund Muskie].

Their strategy led to legislation signed by President Ford in 1976 – watershed legislation that interjected politics and bureaucracy into what had largely been a rational decision process based on national security interests and military judgement. The 1976 legislation mandated that DoD 1) notify Congress when a base was a "candidate" for closure or realignment, 2) provide detailed justification of all proposed closures or realignments, and 3) comply with the costly and time-consuming National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). By creating new institutional (political and bureaucratic) mechanisms -- environmental studies, NEPA court challenges, hearings on the justification for base closures, and disapproval of funds needed to divest installations -- Congress gained more tools to undercut Pentagon closure or realignment prospects. The 1976 legislation essentially ended Executive branch control over the base closure process, while also making it politically untenable for congressional members *not* to block DoD closure or realignment recommendations. The strategy worked: only four minor military installations closed in the following decade (and Congressman Cohen's vigilance kept Loring AFB open until 1991).

With the 1980s came a growing budget deficit and passage of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act, circumstances that created significant pressure on the Republican Administration and the Democratic Congress to cut spending. While both the national mood and the Reagan administration were pro-defense, the political and economic climate opened a window of opportunity for shedding excess military infrastructure. The road to cooperation between the executive and legislative branches, however, was not always smooth. In 1986, when Congress asked DoD to propose defense budget cuts, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger responded by offering to close three military bases, each in districts of leading Democratic critics of higher defense spending (House Speaker Tip O'Neil and Congresswoman Pat Schroeder were two of them). Weinberger's actions

fueled mistrust within both Congress and the media that the process used by Pentagon to select BRAC candidates involved far more than rational decision-making and bureaucratic machinations. Indeed, senior DoD officials have admittedly leveraged their ability to retain military bases in legislators' districts in exchange for votes in favor of key defense programs.⁹

When Secretary of Defense William Cheney came to office, he seized the opportunity to work with the Congress (whence he came) in crafting a base closure law that could accommodate mutual executive and legislative branch interests but, at the same time, more rationally align infrastructure with declining force structure. Knowing that the nature of pork barrel defense spending made votes on base closure untenable, Congressman Dick Armey and Senator William Roth drafted a bill that put the decision in the hands of an independent, bipartisan commission with far less motive for opportunism than either the executive or legislative branches. In passing the bill, Congress conceded that its political self-interests precluded it from making sound base closure decisions and thus opted to remove itself from the heart of the process. It sought the same from the executive branch. The bill, which became law in 1988, empowered the Commission on Base Realignment and Closure to independently review and recommend installations for closure or realignment, thus making it the “rational actor” in the BRAC process. Congress also established a “DoD Base Closure Account” so the Pentagon could finance related short-term closure costs without having to lobby Congress for additional appropriations. Critics referred to the measure as an exercise in legislative self-denial, “an example of legislation by which Congress, in order to promote public policy that is good for the nation as a whole, voluntarily deprived itself of the ability to take credit for standing up for constituents.”¹⁰ However, its success was two-fold: it created a

⁹ Andrew C. Mayer and David E. Lockwood, “Military Base Closures,” *CRS Issue Brief*, February 21, 1995.

¹⁰ Steven Kelman, “Public Spirit Lives, Even in Congress,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 1988, p. 36.

more credible process that moved BRAC decisions beyond gridlock, and it produced an outcome where the results could at least be rationalized if not rationally explained.

Despite the major installations the 1988 Commission recommended to close, the Cold War's end necessitated even deeper force structure reductions, a situation that led Secretary of Defense Cheney to announce the need for another BRAC in 1990. Because the 1988 Commission charter had expired at that time and there was no special enabling legislation for unilateral DoD action, Congress initially protested Cheney's plans as politically motivated. Their suspicions notwithstanding, the reality of the budget deficit and Graham-Rudman-Hollings made clear the need to for longer-term reductions in military infrastructure. With the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990, Congress carefully explicated procedures for another independent, bipartisan Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (DBCRC). In stipulating that BRAC rounds be conducted in 1991, 1993 and 1995, Congress sought to curb political and bureaucratic machinations that might stagnate the process. The 1990 Act served as the framework from which the most recent -- and controversial -- base closure decisions were made.

POLITICAL PERMUTATIONS WITH THE 1990 ACT

The Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990 worked well in identifying over 300 military installations for closure or realignment. The key to the process was that once the DBCRC compiled its recommendations, neither the President nor Congress could make changes to the list. Both had to either approve or reject the recommendations as presented in total. A narrow approval timeframe (15 days for the President and 45 days for Congress) coupled with an "all or nothing" option left little room for political maneuvering. The process, and the psychology behind it, was designed to protect the President and Congress from making any changes. Thus, after

vehement, theatrical rhetoric in opposition, the DBCRC recommendations were accepted as presented. In 1995, however, “the sticky fingerprints of politics” entered the process at several points. In doing so, the final round of BRAC was nearly jeopardized and the dynamics of support behind the base closure process suffered irrevocable damage.

The 1990 Act required a bipartisan commission of eight members be appointed by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate. The President was to appoint the commission chairman; however, the Act sought to balance the political loyalties of those nominated to the commission. Accordingly, the President consulted with the House Speaker and the Senate Majority Leader in appointing two members each, while the Senate and House Minority Leaders were given say on one appointment each. The nomination process for DBCRC commissioners had its share of political posturing in ensuring representation of political interests: not only did those in the consultative process seek to nominate individuals of the same party affiliation, they also sought individuals who would be responsive to their home state and district.

In February 1995, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole nominated former Secretary of the Army Michael Stone to serve on the DBCRC. The White House expressed concerns over potential conflicts of interests with Stone and ultimately did not submit him with other DBCRC nominations for Senate confirmation. Republicans read this as overt gamesmanship against the Majority Leader and his 1996 presidential candidacy. Senate Republicans refused to confirm any of the nominated Commissioners until the White House justified its inaction with Stone, creating angst in DoD that an official commission would not convene in time to achieve critical BRAC closure savings.¹¹ Working to diffuse concern over Stone’s potential conflicts of interests, Senator Sam Nunn retorted,

¹¹ “Dole, White House Agree to Nominee to Panel,” *Congressional Quarterly*, February 18, 1995, p. 36.

“... if we picked a commission that had no connection with any base in the United States, we'd be going to Europe or Japan for that commission. We wouldn't be picking Americans.”¹² Nunn's comments foretold the reality of the 1995 BRAC round: even with an independent bipartisan commission, there is no such thing as a completely neutral process. Only days before DoD was to submit its closure and realignment recommendations to the DBCRC, the Senate confirmed seven Commissioners -- six which the White House originally submitted plus a replacement for Mr. Stone.

Unlike the 1988 process that preceded it, the 1990 Act limited the DBCRC to a review role only, giving DoD sole responsibility to compile and present BRAC recommendations to the DBCRC based on a rational cost-benefit-risk analysis of the eight specific criteria (Figure 1). Military value was given priority weighting, followed by return on investment, with tertiary consideration to cumulative economic and environmental impact on the local communities. The DBCRC had the authority to change any of DoD's recommendations if they "substantially deviated" in their analysis of the eight criteria or the long-term force structure plan. Just as the 1990 Act enabled Congress to shift blame for the politically unpopular decision to close bases, the military Services and DoD could divert criticism if the DBCRC overrode their decisions to retain vulnerable bases in key congressional members' districts or home states. As a consequence, the DBCRC recommended closing a number of installations not recommended by the Services or DoD.

The DBCRC made two such recommendations in 1995 – the closure of the depots at Kelly AFB, Texas and McClellan AFB, California. These two recommendations impacted 22,000 workers in key battlegrounds of the 1996 presidential election campaign. When President Clinton

¹² Ibid, p. 36.

hinted at an unprecedented rejection of the commission's recommendations, the DBCRC Chairman, former Democratic Senator Alan Dixon, urged him to put national interests above his own.¹³ The President ultimately approved the closure list but only after a fist-pounding press conference in the Rose Garden where he denounced the BRAC decision as an "outrage." In his transmittal memo to Congress, President Clinton emphatically asserted his intent to privatize depot activities in place at Kelly and McClellan in order to keep the predominantly civilian workforce in place.¹⁴ The plan to "privatize in place" began an acrimonious battle between the Clinton Administration and the 50-member House depot caucus. Initially, caucus members wanted the workload from the closing depots in order to boost the military value of their depots for future BRACs. Caucus members soon realized that the most effective way to protect their depots from closure was to prevent future BRAC authorizations. Their reciprocal and partially justified claims of outrage over the politicization of BRAC rapidly eroded confidence in the process and created the current political stalemate over future base closures.

It is a twist of irony that, as a member of Congress in the 1970's, Secretary of Defense Cohen instigated the laws that now constrain him from shedding redundant infrastructure without approval from Congress.¹⁵ His tenure as Secretary of Defense no doubt offers a different perspective of base closures, particularly in the context of an international and domestic situation dramatically different than two decades ago. In a classic case of clientitis, Secretary Cohen has not given up on finding common ground with Congress in order to close excess military infrastructure. As recently as April 1999, he suggested that he is open to developing a new formula for

¹³ Christopher, Carey, "Sales Job: Dixon Urges Clinton to OK Base Closings," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, July 1, 1995, p. 13B.

¹⁴ The President stated that he would consider any action by Congress to restrict privatization as a breach of P.L. 101-510 as a reversal of prevailing BRAC legislation.

¹⁵ "Congress Stymies Cost Cutters by Keeping Vote-Getting Bases," *USA Today*, April 8, 1998, p. 14A.

approaching base closures, such as limiting at the outset the type of bases that might be closed – naturally, there would be no politics involved in that decision.

CONCLUSION

Most of us would like to believe that elected officials work to promote public-good proposals that benefit as many people as possible, generate benefits in excess of costs and are can be efficiently implemented. In reality, elected officials understand the psychological and political imperatives behind constituent service and programs that concentrate benefits to those within their political districts. Legislators who fail to protect military installations in their district face tremendous electoral risks: base closings and significant realignments can devastate local economies as personnel leave, businesses are impacted and the tax base dries up. Even when legislators recognize that one of their military bases is obsolete, they understand that political reality demands they defend the installation, particularly given the expensive, high-profile public relations campaigns communities now use to extol the value of even the most minor military installations. Unfortunately, without the political cover of a BRAC process, the benefits of sustaining unneeded or inefficient installations accrue to a limited population while the costs in terms of reduced military readiness and wasted resources must be borne by all citizens.¹⁶

While the 1995 BRAC round will profoundly influence future base closures, BRAC commissions have served an important and unique purpose: they altered the dynamics of decision-making by subordinating “politics” to achieve “good government” decisions.¹⁷ In doing so, they created a rational, political, organizational and psychological umbrella under which elected officials could produce decisions contradictory to their self-interests. Just as the Framers intended, the

¹⁶ Twight, p. 237.

psychology of the “ballot box” drives ambition and policy outcomes among elected officials in both the executive and legislative branches. Independent commissions, on the other hand, personify the ideal that public policy decisions should be based on impartial consideration of the merits of an issue, and that an informed, rational, value-maximizing outcome should result. While the independent nature of the base closure commissions brought informed expertise to the decision-making process, it also increased the likelihood that objective decisions would result by reducing parochial and self-interests. Having said this, it is interesting to note that a 1997 study found decision outcomes of base closure commissions to be very similar to those of elected representatives. The study concluded that independent commissions do not necessarily change the pattern of political influence on the outcomes. Instead, their primary contribution is to allow outcomes to occur at all.¹⁸

The evolution of BRAC is indeed a paradox of how political, bureaucratic and psychological elements, when properly aligned, can produce a fairly rational process. Such an outcome can be elusive to achieve and is unlikely to continue once “the sticky fingerprints of politics get in there.” The evolution of the base closure process provides two important lessons to guide behavior in strategic decision-making: 1) in politics, as in life, what goes around comes around and 2) in politics, as in war, the result is never final.

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¹⁷ In *Controversial Issues in Economic Regulatory Policy*, (Newbury Park: Sage Publications), 1993, Marcia Lynn Whicker cites the 1914 Federal Trade Commission, 1972 Consumer Product Safety Commission and the Federal Reserve as examples of other commissions established to achieve a more non-partisan outcome.

¹⁸ Marcia Lynn Whicker and Nicholas A. Giannatasio, “The Politics of Military Base Closing: A New Theory of Influence,” *Public Administration Quarterly*, Summer 1997, pp. 176-208.

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FIGURE 1

The following eight criteria were considered in reviewing military installations for closure or realignment under the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990. Priority weighting of criteria was given first to military value, followed by return on investment, and then economic and environmental impact on base communities:

Military Value

1. Current and future mission requirements, and impact on operational readiness of DoD's total force
2. Availability and condition of land, facilities and associated airspace at both existing and potential receiving location(s)
3. Ability to accommodate contingency, mobilization and future total force requirements at both existing and potential receiving location(s)
4. Cost and manpower implications

Return on Investment

5. Extent and timing of potential costs and savings, including the number of years (beginning with the date of completion of closure or realignment) for savings to exceed the costs to close

Impact

6. Economic impact on communities
7. Ability of both existing and potential receiving communities' infrastructure to support forces, missions and personnel
8. Environmental impact (but not environmental cleanup costs)